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The crown of thorns

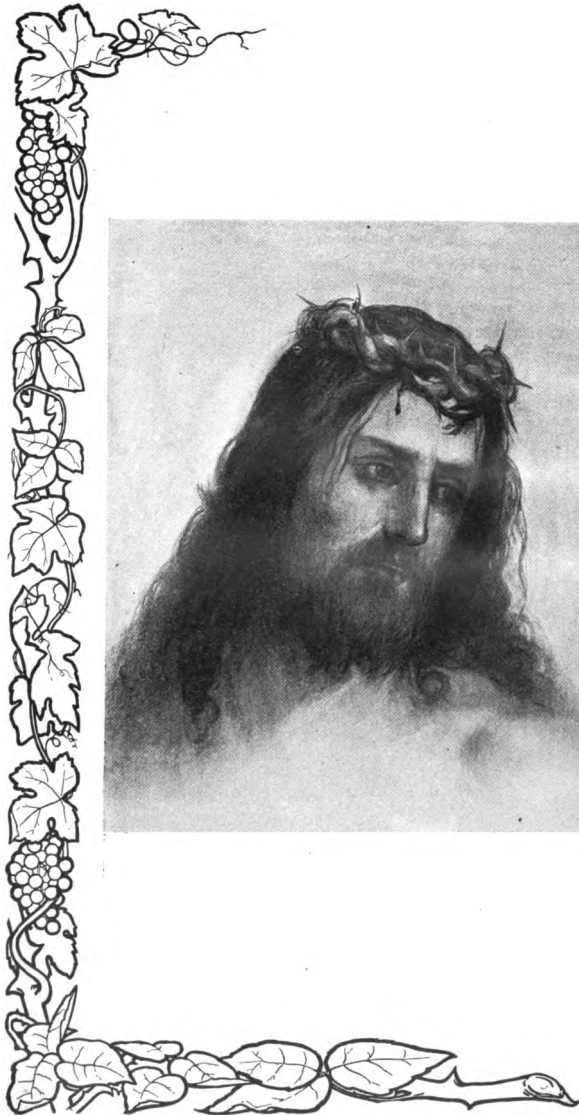
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The Crown of Thorns

A Story of the Time of Christ

By

PAUL CARUS

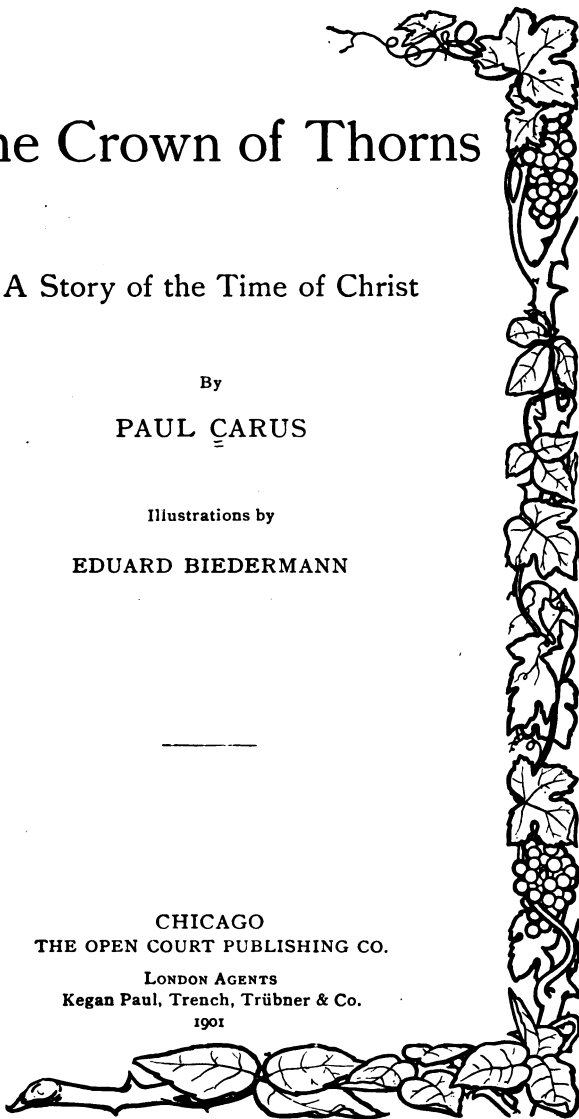
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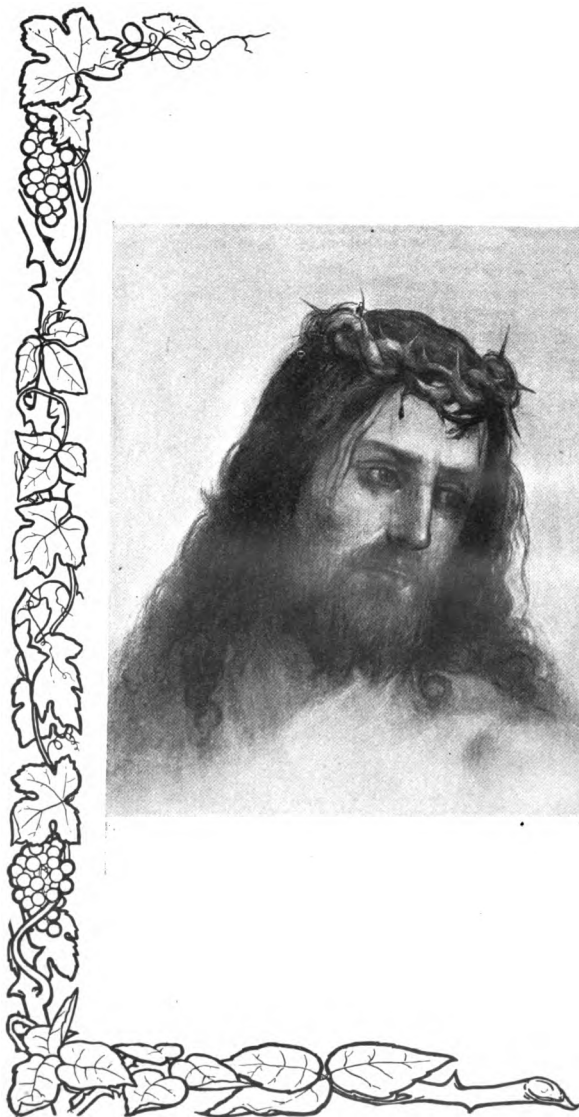
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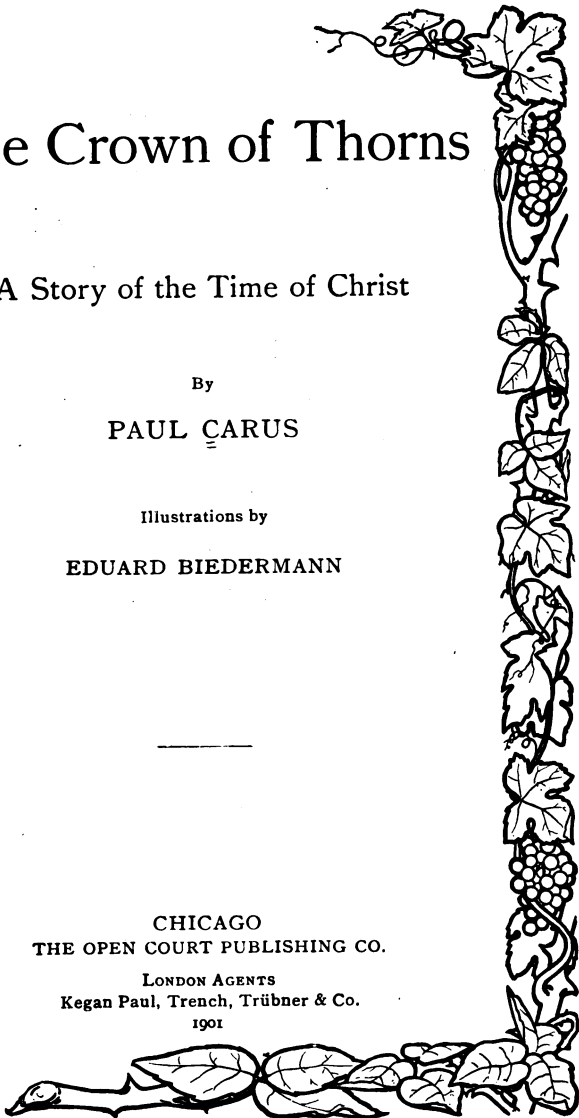
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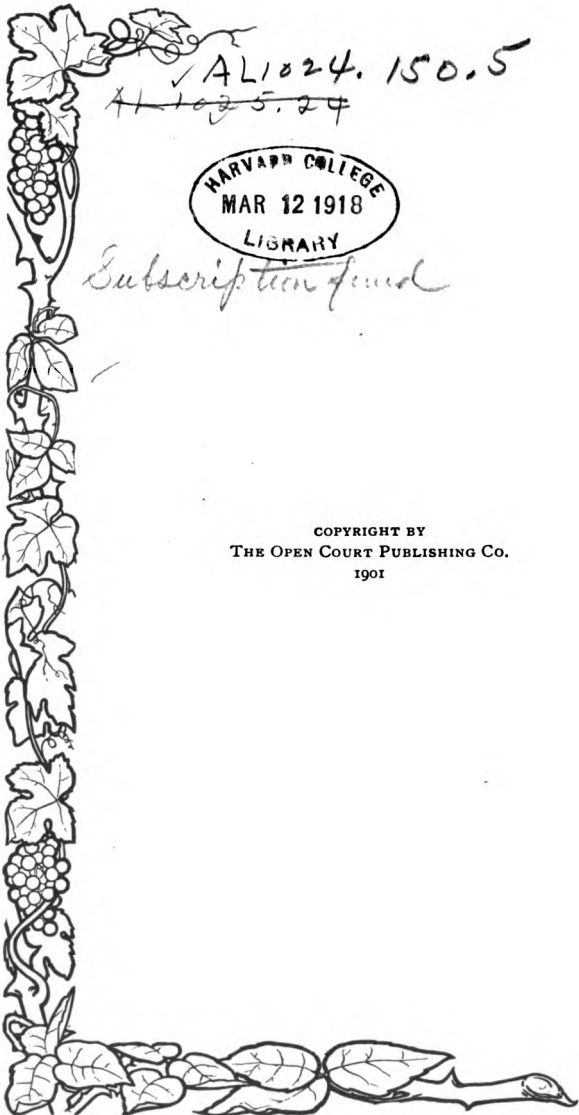
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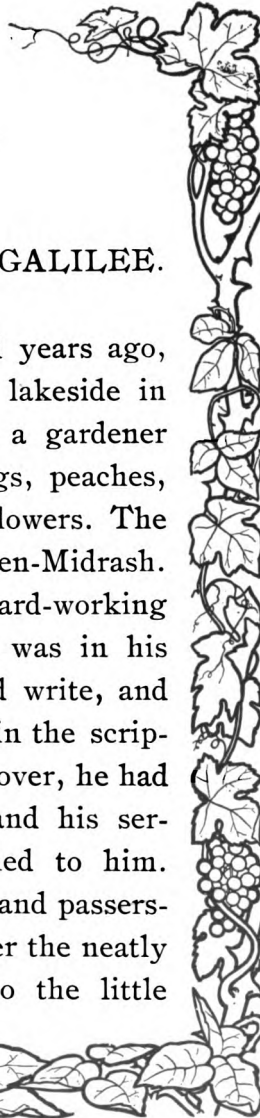


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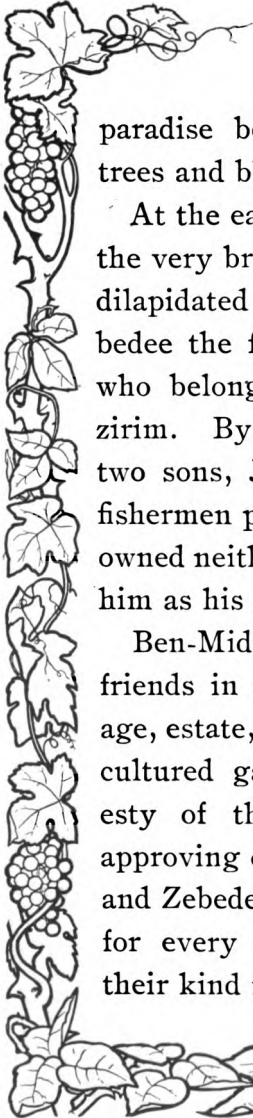
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THE GARDENER OF GALILEE.

ALMOST two thousand years ago, there lived by the lakeside in Galilee, near Capernaum, a gardener who raised fine grapes, figs, peaches, and other good fruits, and flowers. The gardener's name was Ben-Midrash. He was an industrious, hard-working man, and his whole heart was in his work. He could read and write, and was as thoroughly versed in the scriptures as any scribe. Moreover, he had a loving wife and child, and his servants were greatly attached to him. His garden was well kept, and passers-by looked with pleasure over the neatly trimmed thorn hedge into the little



paradise beyond with its blossoming trees and blooming flowers.

At the eastern end of the garden, on the very brink of the lake, there lay a dilapidated little cottage owned by Zebedee the fisher, a venerable old man who belonged to the sect of the Nazirim. By his wife Salome he had two sons, James and John; and two fishermen poorer than himself (for they owned neither net nor boat) stayed with him as his servants.

Ben-Midrash and Zebedee were good friends in spite of their differences in age, estate, and religious opinion. The cultured gardener respected the honesty of the poor fisherman without approving of his sectarian associations, and Zebedee and his wife were grateful for every token of sympathy which their kind neighbors showed them.

THE CROWN OF THORNS.

It happened about that time that a prophet arose in Galilee, who preached the gospel of the poor. He was called Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus went about the country, healing the sick and comforting those that were in want. He cast out evil spirits from people who were believed to be obsessed; and he admonished his hearers saying: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." And his fame as a preacher and healer spread throughout all Syria.

One evening the gardener was watering the trees and the vines in his vineyard, when Zebedee entered and said: "Be glad in the Lord and rejoice with me, for my old days shall see the glory of my sons. I was sitting yesterday with my boys and the two hired men in the boat mending my nets, when Jesus, the great nabi of


THE CROWN OF THORNS.



"Be glad in the Lord and rejoice with me!"

Nazareth, passed by. He stayed his steps and watched us for a time, and when we looked up and greeted him with the holy word *Shalomlecha*, Peace be with thee, he addressed himself to James and John, saying unto them: 'Follow me and I will make you fishers of men.' And my sons immediately left the boat, bade me and the servants God speed, and followed him."

Said Ben-Midrash to Zebedee: "What sayest thou? Thou rejoicest in the behavior of thy boys who, following the voice of an unknown prophet, have abandoned their parents in their old age? Were not Jesus of Nazareth a Nazir like thyself, thou wouldst never have suffered thy sons to forsake their trade, which afforded them a fair, albeit modest, living, that they might share the uncertain fate



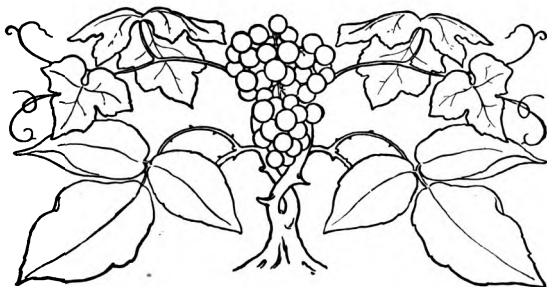
of a wandering preacher. And mind," he added, "Jesus of Nazareth is an innovator and a false prophet. The scribe of our synagogue has warned me not to listen to the speech of this man."

Said Zebedee: "What objection canst thou have to the Nazir sect? The Nazirim of yore, men like Samson and Samuel, who suffered no razor to touch their heads, were devotees of God, and we, the Nazirim of to-day, endeavor to imitate them in holiness and brotherly love. John the Baptist was not less a preacher than the prophets who spoke to our fathers; and since he died a martyr's death, Jesus of Nazareth has risen. Never as yet didst thou hear the great Nazir speak to the people! If thou hadst ever heard him speak, thou wouldst not say that

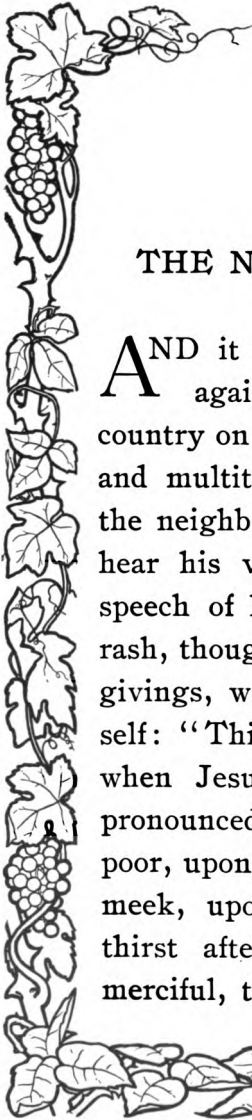
which thou sayest. Thou wouldst know that he is the Messiah ; and, mark, the time will come when he will rule over Israel, and my sons shall share the glory of his kingdom.”

Replied Ben-Midrash: “Thou art a fool to rejoice in the misfortune that hath befallen thee. Jesus of Nazareth confoundeth the souls of men. He hath confounded also the souls of James and John, thy sons.”

From that day Zebedee and Ben-Midrash ceased to be friends.



THE NABI OF NAZARETH.



AND it happened that Jesus came again into that region of the country on the shore of Lake Galilee, and multitudes from Capernaum and the neighboring villages went out to hear his voice and to listen to the speech of his mouth. And Ben-Mid-rash, though his heart was full of mis-givings, went also, saying unto himself: "This man is a deceiver." But when Jesus opened his mouth and pronounced his blessings upon the poor, upon those that mourn, upon the meek, upon those that hunger and thirst after righteousness, upon the merciful, the pure in heart, the peace-

makers, and upon those that are persecuted for righteousness' sake, he grew cheerful and forgot all his misgivings.

The multitude sat as if entranced. The voice of this wonderful Nazir prophet was so full of music and so sympathetic that a strange joy came over Ben-Midrash and he felt as if he had shaken all his burdens from off his soul. He now understood the power that had drawn James and John to this extraordinary man.

Jesus spoke about the fulfilment of the law, he spoke about the perfection of God and about the kingdom of God; and all his words appealed to the gardener's heart. Jesus warned the people against false prophets and said: "Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns or figs of thistles? A good tree cannot bring





*“Ye shall know them
by their fruits.”*

forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit.”

When Ben-Midrash heard Jesus speak of fruit, he thought of his thorn hedge and his fruit trees at home and said to himself: “This man speaketh of things of which he knoweth nothing.” The old bitterness filled his soul, and he listened no longer to the

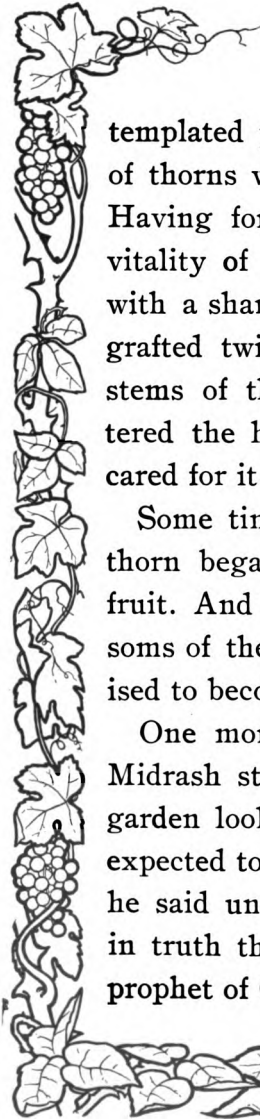
THE CROWN OF THORNS.

words of Jesus but went away full of indignation.

When Ben-Midrash returned to his home, he paused at the gate and con-



...went away full of indignation.



templated pensively the strong hedge of thorns which sheltered his garden. Having for a while pondered on the vitality of the hedge, he cut from it with a sharp knife several stalks, and grafted twigs of a sweet vine on the stems of the severed thorn. He watered the hedge daily, and diligently cared for it.

Some time passed, and the grafted thorn began to blossom and to bear fruit. And lo! the blossoms were blossoms of the vine, and the fruits promised to become good sweet grapes.

One morning in the autumn Ben-Midrash stood at the gate before his garden looking at the grapes which he expected to gather from his thorn, and he said unto himself: "Now I know in truth that Jesus of Nazareth is no prophet of God, but a deceiver."

THE CROWN OF THORNS.

As he stood there musing, he lifted his eyes and saw Jesus pass by in



*"Art thou not
Jesus of Nazareth?"*

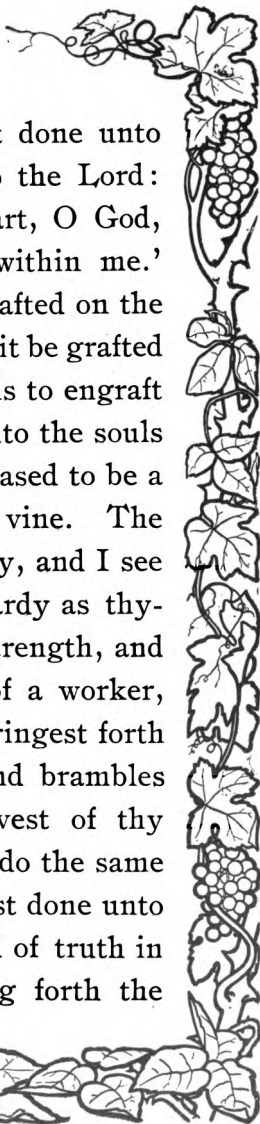
the street. And he stopped Jesus and said to him: "Art thou not Jesus of

Nazareth and didst thou not speak to us from the mount?"

Jesus answered: "Thou sayest so. I am Jesus of Nazareth, and I spoke to the people from the mount."

Said Ben-Midrash: "Didst thou not say that men cannot gather grapes of thorns and figs of thistles? Lo! I have raised grapes that grow upon thorns. What sayest thou now? Art thou truly a prophet, and hast thou truly been sent by God?"

Jesus glanced at the grapes that had grown on the thorn, and then he looked Ben-Midrash straight in the eye, and the look went deep into the gardener's heart. "Ben-Midrash," he said, "thou hast done well to graft the vine upon the thorn of thy vineyard. Thou askest me whether I am a true prophet. Observe what I am doing. I do the same



unto men which thou hast done unto the thorn. David cried to the Lord: 'Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.' As nobler plants can be grafted on the thorn, so can the divine spirit be grafted into the heart. My work is to engraft purity and righteousness into the souls of men. Thy thorn has ceased to be a thorn; it hath become a vine. The thorn of thy hedge is hardy, and I see in thy eyes that it is as hardy as thyself. Thou art a man of strength, and thy hands are the hands of a worker, but the fruits which thou bringest forth are not grapes. Briars and brambles of bitterness are the harvest of thy heart. Why dost thou not do the same unto thy heart as thou hast done unto the thorn? Plant the word of truth in thy soul, and it will bring forth the



THE CROWN OF THORNS.

sweet grapes of divine grace, of righteousness, and of love.”



*Jesus laid his
hand upon his
head.*

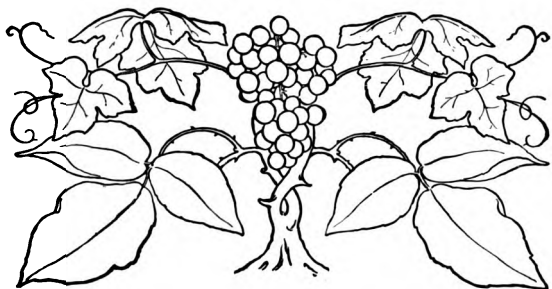
Ben-Midrash bowed down before
Jesus and said: “What is my soul

THE CROWN OF THORNS.

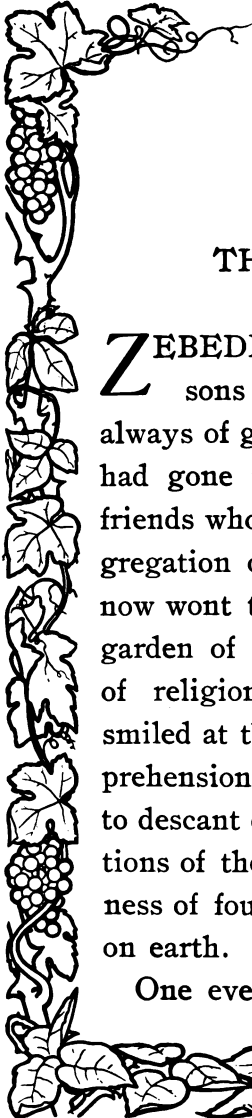
but a thorn? Prune thou its prickly branches and graft thy soul into mine.”

Jesus laid his hand upon his head and said: “Be it so! The souls of men are like trees. A good tree beareth good fruit, but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. The wickedness of a man may be great. Nevertheless, there is salvation for his soul. The thorns that are grafted with the sweet vine will bring forth no thorns, but grapes.”

From that day Ben-Midrash and Zebedee were friends again.

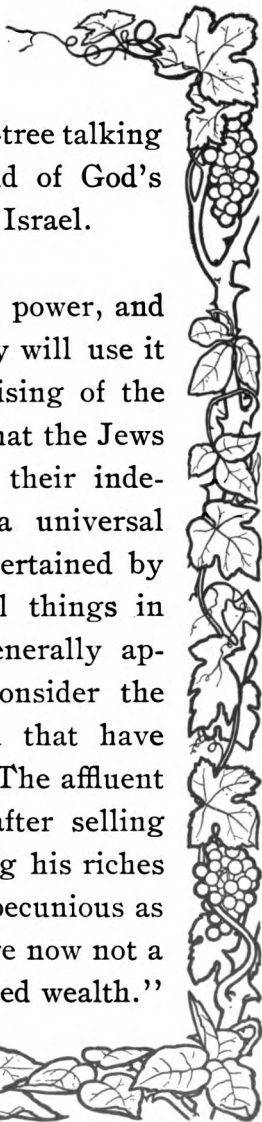


THE CENTURION.



ZEBEDEE had not heard from his sons for a long time, but he was always of good cheer. His wife Salome had gone to Jerusalem on a visit to friends who also belonged to the congregation of the Nazirim, and he was now wont to pass his evenings in the garden of Ben-Midrash. They talked of religion, and the old fisherman smiled at the lack of faith and the apprehensions of his neighbor who used to descant on the extravagant expectations of the Nazirim and the hopelessness of founding a messianic kingdom on earth.

One evening the two sat on a bench



under the shade of an olive-tree talking of the troublous times and of God's promises to the children of Israel.

Said Ben-Midrash :

“The Romans have the power, and there is no doubt that they will use it to crush any national uprising of the Jews. But even granting that the Jews succeeded in maintaining their independence, the ideal of a universal brotherhood such as is entertained by the Nazirim who hold all things in common, could not be generally applied to society. Only consider the fate of the few rich men that have joined the congregation. The affluent Ephraim of Capernaum, after selling his estates and surrendering his riches to the elders, is now as impecunious as any of his brethren who are now not a whit better off for his added wealth.”



THE CROWN OF THORNS.



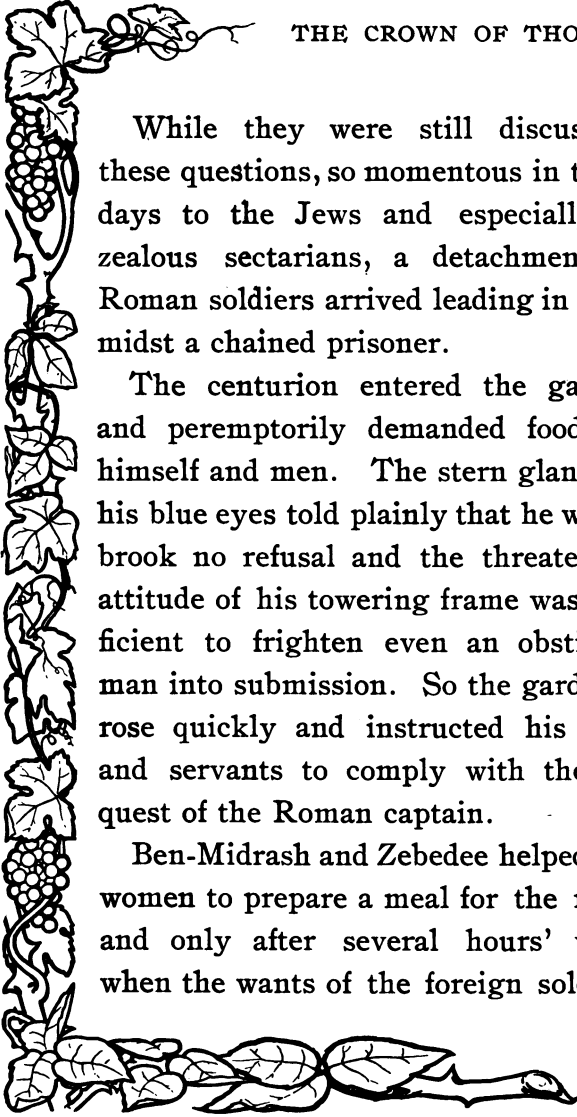
The two sat on a bench in the shade of an olive tree.

THE CROWN OF THORNS.



The centurion entered the garden.

“Bear in mind,” replied Zebedee, “that he has stored up treasures in heaven. When the day of judgment comes he will shine in glory like an angel.”



While they were still discussing these questions, so momentous in those days to the Jews and especially to zealous sectarians, a detachment of Roman soldiers arrived leading in their midst a chained prisoner.

The centurion entered the garden and peremptorily demanded food for himself and men. The stern glance of his blue eyes told plainly that he would brook no refusal and the threatening attitude of his towering frame was sufficient to frighten even an obstinate man into submission. So the gardener rose quickly and instructed his wife and servants to comply with the request of the Roman captain.

Ben-Midrash and Zebedee helped the women to prepare a meal for the men, and only after several hours' work when the wants of the foreign soldiers




had been satisfied, did the host and his friend think of themselves and sit down to a frugal supper. After supper they took the cup, gave thanks, drank of it, and prayed for the kingdom to come.

As the night deepened, Ben-Midrash lit a light and sat down in company with his friend. They were exchanging their observations of the day when the Roman captain entered and joined them at the table. He was a heathen, and his presence was an annoyance to the two Israelites. But how could they refuse him? Had he not power to deal with them as he pleased? Thus, more in fear and trembling than with a feeling of hospitality they entertained the gigantic Gentile and offered him a cup of wine, saying, "Drink, Roman, and may you prosper!"

The warrior accepted the cup with





soldierly grace and proved an affable companion. He spoke Aramaic, the language of the country, fairly well and said: "Do not call me Roman. Though in the service of Cæsar, both my soldiers and myself are children of the Northern country. We left our home to see the world. Call me Longinus, for that is my name as the Romans translated it from the speech of my folk at home."

"What!" exclaimed Bed-Midrash, "you are not a Roman and yet serve Cæsar?"

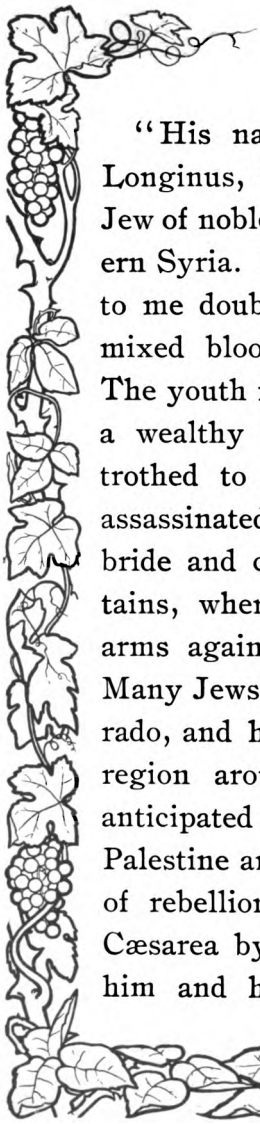
"Why shouldn't we serve Cæsar, if he pays us well?" replied the centurion. "What do we care for Rome? Rome is but the footstool of Cæsar, and if he pays us for it we'll upset even Rome itself to please him."

The two Jews were astonished at the

blunt words of their guest, and being delighted with the thought that he was not a Roman, they ventured to speak more at length of the Jews' hostility to Rome and their hopes of a messianic kingdom. Longinus showed much interest in, as well as knowledge of, Jewish institutions. But he shook his head not without some contempt. "Pshaw!" said he, "the cause of all the trouble in Judea is the religion of the people. The Jews are obstinate because they are superstitious. They believe in the coming of a messiah, and what is the result? There are many messiahs rising in their midst and every one of them makes matters worse. Our prisoner is one of them."

"Your prisoner a messiah!" exclaimed Ben-Midrash and Zebedee in one breath. "Who is he?"



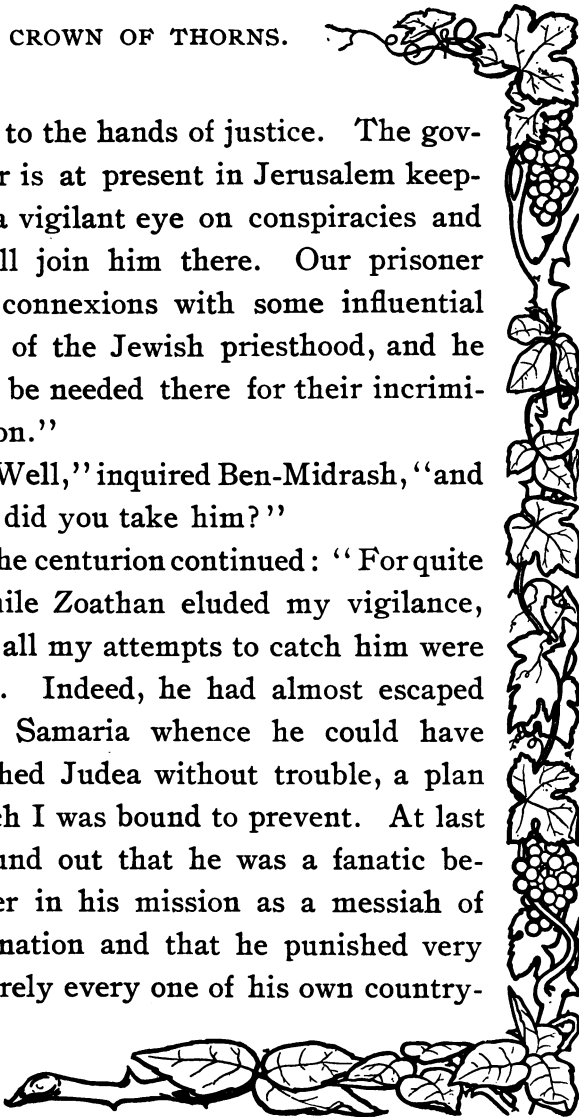


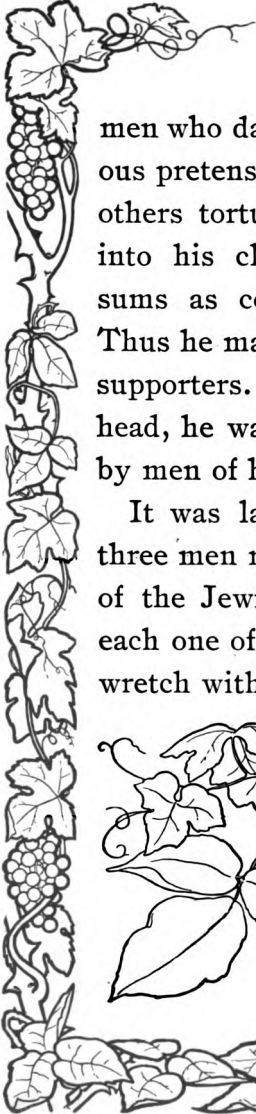
“His name is Zoathan,” replied Longinus, “and he pretends to be a Jew of noble extraction, born in Northern Syria. His descent however seems to me doubtful and I believe he is of mixed blood, probably Jewish-Greek. The youth fell desperately in love with a wealthy Jewish girl who was betrothed to a Gentile magistrate. He assassinated the groom, abducted the bride and carried her into the mountains, where he called the people to arms against the Roman authorities. Many Jews believed in the bold desperado, and he became the terror of the region around Lebanon. As it was anticipated that he would descend upon Palestine and carry with him the spirit of rebellion, I was despatched from Cæsarea by Pontius Pilate to capture him and his band and deliver them

over to the hands of justice. The governor is at present in Jerusalem keeping a vigilant eye on conspiracies and I will join him there. Our prisoner had connexions with some influential men of the Jewish priesthood, and he may be needed there for their incrimination."

"Well," inquired Ben-Midrash, "and how did you take him?"

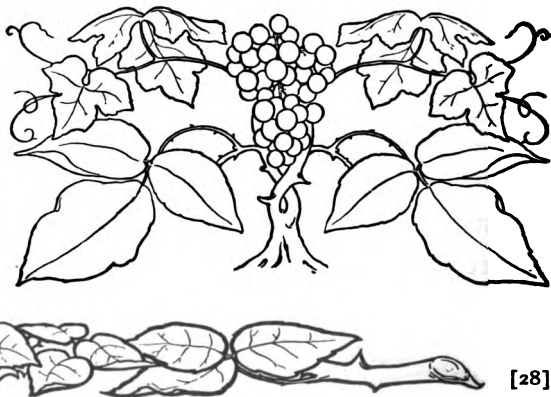
The centurion continued: "For quite a while Zoathan eluded my vigilance, and all my attempts to catch him were vain. Indeed, he had almost escaped into Samaria whence he could have reached Judea without trouble, a plan which I was bound to prevent. At last I found out that he was a fanatic believer in his mission as a messiah of his nation and that he punished very severely every one of his own country-

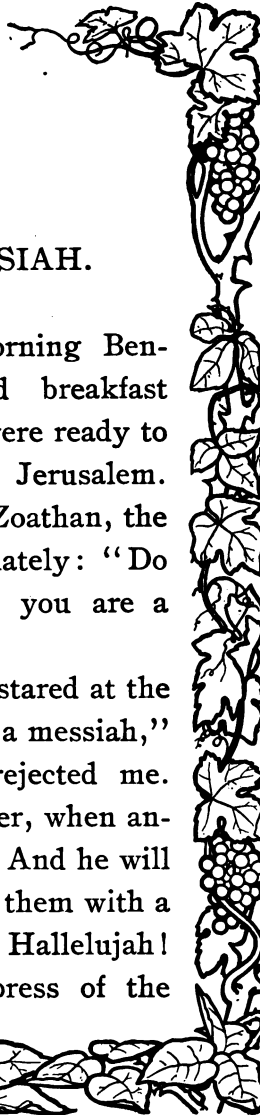




men who dared to oppose his preposterous pretensions. Some he had hanged, others tortured, and from all who fell into his clutches he extorted heavy sums as contributions to his cause. Thus he made enemies among his own supporters. When I set a price on his head, he was delivered into my power by men of his own nationality."

It was late in the night when the three men retired; and they all dreamt of the Jewish messiah in chains, but each one of them thought of the poor wretch with different sentiments.





THE REBEL MESSIAH.

EARLY the next morning Ben-Midrash distributed breakfast among the soldiers, who were ready to continue their march to Jerusalem. When he handed bread to Zoathan, the gardener asked compassionately: "Do you actually believe that you are a messiah?"

The unfortunate youth stared at the questioner: "Truly I am a messiah," he said, "but God has rejected me. The day will come, however, when another messiah shall rise: And he will smite the nations and rule them with a rod of iron. Glory, glory, Hallelujah! He will tread the winepress of the





He handed bread to Zoathan.

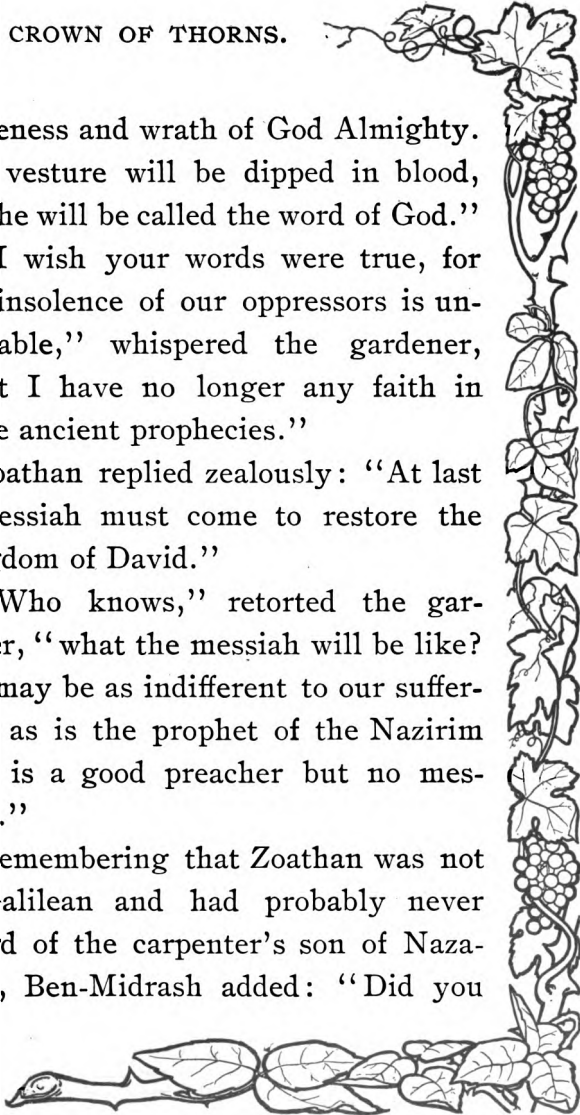
fierceness and wrath of God Almighty. His vesture will be dipped in blood, and he will be called the word of God."


"I wish your words were true, for the insolence of our oppressors is unbearable," whispered the gardener, "but I have no longer any faith in these ancient prophecies."

Zoathan replied zealously: "At last a messiah must come to restore the kingdom of David."

"Who knows," retorted the gardener, "what the messiah will be like? He may be as indifferent to our sufferings as is the prophet of the Nazirim who is a good preacher but no messiah."

Remembering that Zoathan was not a Galilean and had probably never heard of the carpenter's son of Nazareth, Ben-Midrash added: "Did you



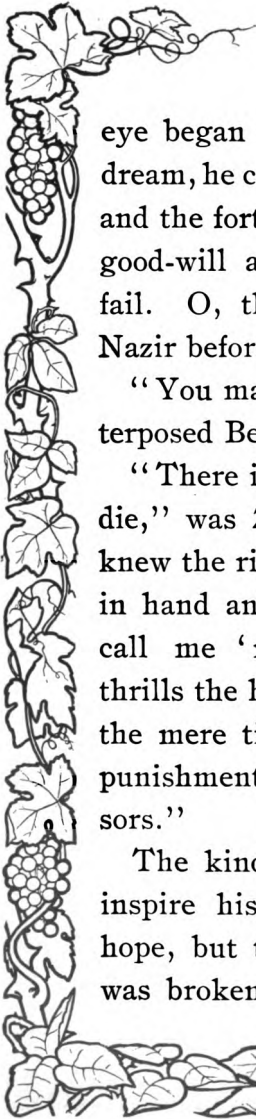


ever hear of Jesus the Nazir? He preaches good-will and loving-kindness, and not the sword, but what he says goeth to the heart!"

Zoathan lifted up his chained hands in astonishment, as if a ray of light had fallen into his bewildered soul. "Good-will and loving-kindness!" he repeated, musing on the words. "My sweet bride suggested that very thought to me. Good-will and loving-kindness,—that might be our salvation! With her I enjoyed a brief span of happiness; but she is dead now."

Here the voice of the youth faltered. "I mean to say," he added hesitatingly, "when in dire danger of being recaptured by the Romans, she died by my hand. I want to forget the scene, but I cannot. Still it could not be helped. But then"—and the prison-

er's eyes shone with a demoniacal fire exhibiting a fierce fanaticism—"but then I waded through blood and I swore to prepare the supper of the great God to the fowls that fly in the midst of heaven, consisting of the flesh of Gentile kings and captains and mighty men. I was chief of a small band of men, like myself bold and desperate. They performed miracles of heroism and I forced the people to support our cause. My men believed in me and many of the peasantry worshipped me as the messiah. My ambition grew with my success and I dreamt of bringing into subjection the whole of Syria. Some of my own people hated me because I made them stand up manfully for their country and their religion; and I fell a victim to foul treason! So I failed." His

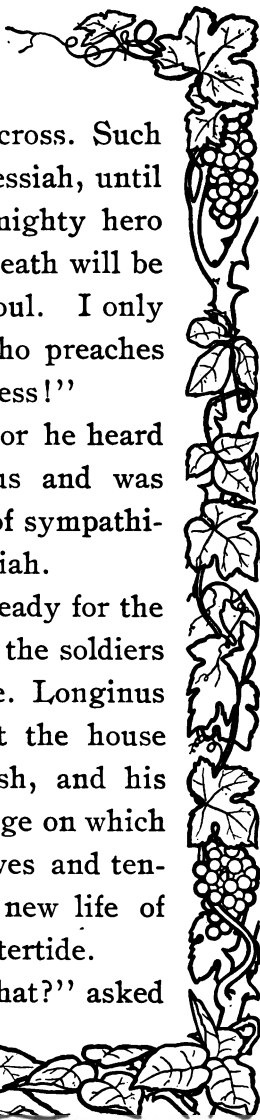


eye began to wander; then as if in a dream, he continued: "Power is brittle and the fortunes of war changeful. But good-will and loving-kindness cannot fail. O, that I could see Jesus the Nazir before I die!"

"You may meet him some day," interposed Ben-Midrash.

"There is naught left for me but to die," was Zoathan's sad answer. "I knew the risk I ran when I took sword in hand and allowed my adherents to call me 'messiah.' The very word thrills the heart of a Jew and therefore the mere title is deserving of capital punishment in the eyes of our oppressors."

The kind-hearted gardener tried to inspire his captive countryman with hope, but the spirit of the bold rebel was broken and he would not be com-



forted. "I shall die on the cross. Such will be the fate of every messiah, until the right one come, the mighty hero of God. But I am done. Death will be salvation to my tortured soul. I only want to see the prophet who preaches good-will and loving-kindness!"

Ben-Midrash withdrew, for he heard the firm step of Longinus and was afraid of being suspected of sympathising with the chained messiah.

The command to make ready for the march was now given and the soldiers arranged themselves in line. Longinus threw a farewell glance at the house and garden of Ben-Midrash, and his eye fell upon the thorn hedge on which he beheld young vine leaves and tendrils sprouting with the new life of spring, for it was near Eastertide.

"What strange plant is that?" asked

THE CROWN OF THORNS.

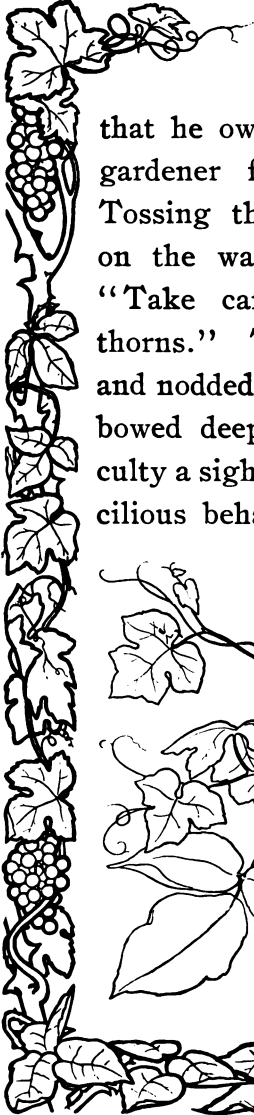


"What strange plant is that?"

the centurion, addressing the gardener ; and the latter told him how, for the sake of proving that it could be done, he had grafted the sweet vine on the thorn.

Longinus, having caught the sense of the gardener's explanation, gave only divided attention to the long story. He stooped down and, without asking permission of the owner, cut off a long stem which showed on one and the same branch dense clusters of thorns and leaves of sweet vine. "That is an interesting plant," he said, "I will show it as a curiosity to Pontius Pilate, the governor."

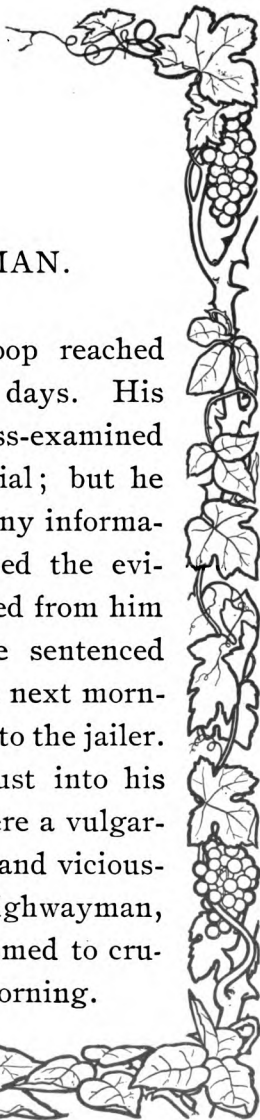
These words Longinus spoke to himself but he spoke loud enough for Ben-Midrash to hear them. Apparently the soldier deemed it beneath his dignity to excuse his demeanor and yet felt



THE CROWN OF THORNS.

that he owed some explanation to the gardener for cutting off the twig. Tossing the branch to an attendant on the waggon, the centurion said: "Take care of this, but mind the thorns." Then he mounted his horse and nodded a farewell to his host, who bowed deeply, suppressing with difficulty a sigh of indignation at the supercilious behavior of the hated invader.






THE HIGHWAYMAN.

LONGINUS and his troop reached Jerusalem in a few days. His prisoner Zoathan was cross-examined and tried by a court martial; but he was too obstinate to give any information, and his judges deemed the evidence that could be extracted from him worthless. They therefore sentenced him to die on the cross the next morning and delivered him over to the jailer.

When Zoathan was thrust into his cell in the jail he found there a vulgar-looking man full of spite and viciousness. It was Kamma, a highwayman, who, like Zoathan, was doomed to crucifixion on the following morning.




Kamma looked with displeasure at the refined features of his fellow-prisoner. "Who are you?" he asked in a rough manner.

Zoathan cast his eyes down and said in an undertone: "An unfortunate outcast."

"Ha!" laughed Kamma. "So am I! Kamma is an unfortunate outcast, a poor wretch who has lost his stake in the game of life. Kamma is unfortunate but not worse than others, certainly not worse than Cæsar; and Cæsar is great, Cæsar is a god. Cæsar is worshipped, for Cæsar owns the world. There is only a difference of degree between Cæsar and Kamma, that is all. Cæsar stole an empire; Kamma stole coin. Now and then Kamma got a few gold pieces, sometimes a few silver pieces, just as goddess Fortune favored

him. Cæsar marched his armed hosts through Italy and Greece and Egypt, Kamma tramped the highroads in the vicinity of Jerusalem. Great thieves are admired, they are worshipped with divine honors, they are glorified, and their praise is sung by poets; but small thieves are cursed, caught and killed. That is Kamma's lot. There is no difference between Cæsar and Kamma,—save in degree of power and, as a result, in success. Cæsar is crowned, Kamma crucified. All men are alike, they are impelled by hunger and thirst and other appetites. And every one satisfies his wants as he pleases or as he deems best. That is the right, the inborn right, of every creature. Some succeed, others fail; some have the enjoyments of life, others are deprived of their privileges. I belong to the dis-

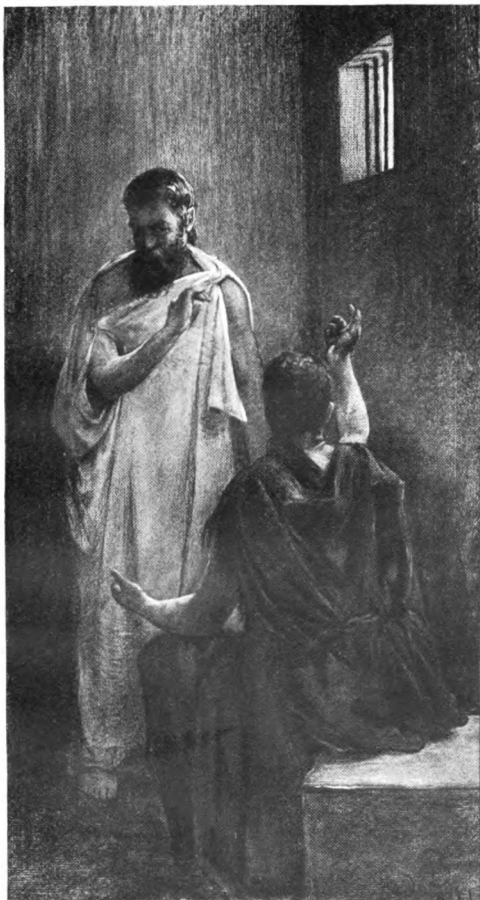





inherited class. I felt my strength and took freely what I desired. But I overrated my powers. My enemies were too numerous. They hunted me down like a wild animal, and here I am like a caged vulture, doomed to end my life on the gallows."

Zoathan did not answer him, and frowned. "Are you too proud to talk to me, my friend and fellow-martyr?" said he. "Oh! you are perchance a nobleman or of priestly degree! Do not take offence at me, for I am no mean vagabond. When I lived in the mountains a free man, a robber, and a member of the brotherhood of liberty, I was one of the boldest among our band. When we pledged our troth to the brotherhood, we mixed our blood with wine and drank all out of the same cup and we became all united in one family,

THE CROWN OF THORNS.

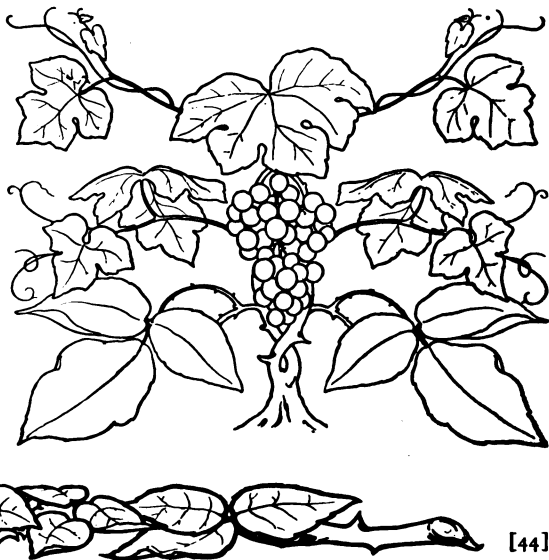


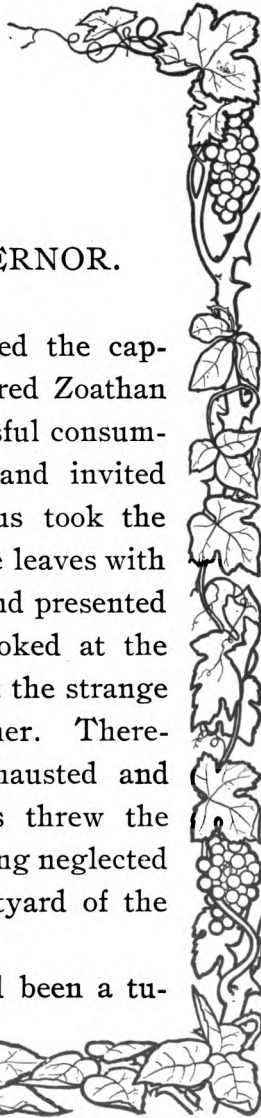
"Cæsar is crowned, Kamma is crucified."



and we had fine fellows in our ranks,—
outlawed captains and sons of kings.
I dare say that there is royal blood
coursing through my veins. Truly,
when my brethren hear of my death,
they will take a most bloody revenge
on my hangmen.”

Zoathan longed for a word of sympathy, but he found no comfort in the wild speech of his fellow-prisoner.

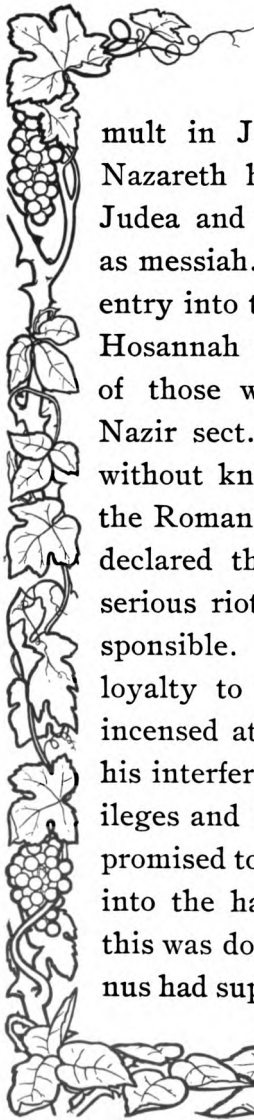




THE ROMAN GOVERNOR.

PONTIUS Pilate praised the captains who had captured Zoathan and Kamma for the successful consummation of their mission and invited them to supper. Longinus took the thornstalk bearing the vine leaves with him to the dining-room and presented it to the governor who looked at the curious plant and smiled at the strange whim of the Galilee gardener. Therewith his interest was exhausted and after supper the servants threw the thorn which they found lying neglected on the table, into the courtyard of the praetorium.

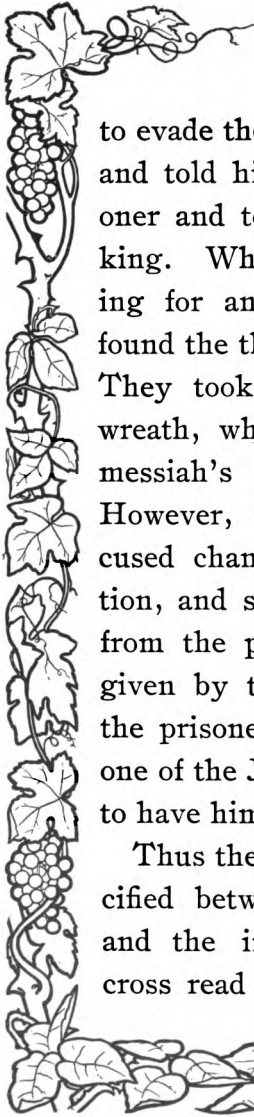
In these days there had been a tu-



mult in Jerusalem. The prophet of Nazareth had come to the capital of Judea and was hailed by the Nazirim as messiah. He had made a triumphal entry into the city under the shouts of Hosannah in which many joined even of those who did not belong to the Nazir sect. The people were excited without knowing why, and the chief of the Roman guards who did police duty, declared that he would, in case of a serious riot, hold the Jewish elders responsible. The priests protested their loyalty to Cæsar and, being already incensed at the Galilean innovator for his interference with their temple privileges and his authoritative demeanor, promised to deliver the leader of the riot into the hands of the Romans. And this was done on the night when Longinus had supped at the governor's house.

Jesus the Nazir was apprehended in a garden on the Mount of Olives; and the priests, after long deliberations in a council which in spite of the late hour had been hastily summoned to the house of the High-Priest, decided to sacrifice the sectarian prophet as a victim to the hated foreigner. They were supported by a mob of local patriots whose cheap acclamations can easily be secured in any large city. The crowd arrived at the praetorium in the early morning to deliver the prisoner into the hands of the Roman authorities.

Pontius Pilate suspected this unwonted show of loyalty. Finding that no actual crime had been committed and that it was merely a case of alleged messianic pretensions, which were not contradicted by the prisoner, he tried



to evade the responsibility of judgment and told his men to scourge the prisoner and to dress him up as a mimicking. When the soldiers were searching for an appropriate diadem, they found the thornstalk in the courtyard. They took it and platted it into a wreath, which they placed upon the messiah's head as a mock crown. However, this treatment of the accused changed nothing in the situation, and since the governor, judging from the presentation of the case, as given by the priests, discovered that the prisoner had much influence with one of the Jewish sects, he gave orders to have him executed as a messiah.

Thus the prophet of Galilee was crucified between Zoathan and Kamma, and the inscription attached to his cross read "Jesus, the Nazir, King of

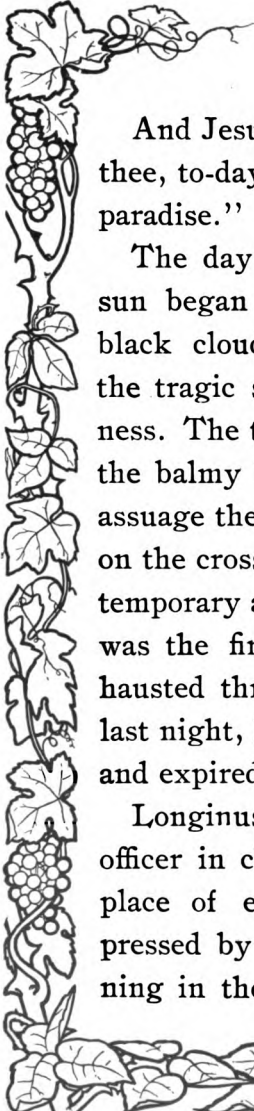


the Jews." The Jewish priests protested against the formulation of the judgment but Pilate did not change it. When those who passed by saw the reputed healer of the Nazirim sect hanging helpless on the cross, they mocked him and said: "He saved others, let him save himself, if he be the messiah, the chosen of God."

And Kamma, hearing these words, repeated the mockery, saying, "If thou be the messiah, save thyself and us!"

Zoathan answering, rebuked him: "Dost thou not fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly: for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss." And he said unto Jesus, "Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom."





And Jesus said: "Verily I say unto thee, to-day shalt thou be with me in paradise."

The day was sultry, and when the sun began to approach the horizon, black clouds gathered and shrouded the tragic scene on Golgotha in darkness. The temperature fell rapidly and the balmy breeze served somewhat to assuage the pain of the three sufferers on the cross; but the relief was merely temporary and the prophet of Nazareth was the first to succumb; being exhausted through the anxieties of the last night, he cried out in a loud voice and expired.

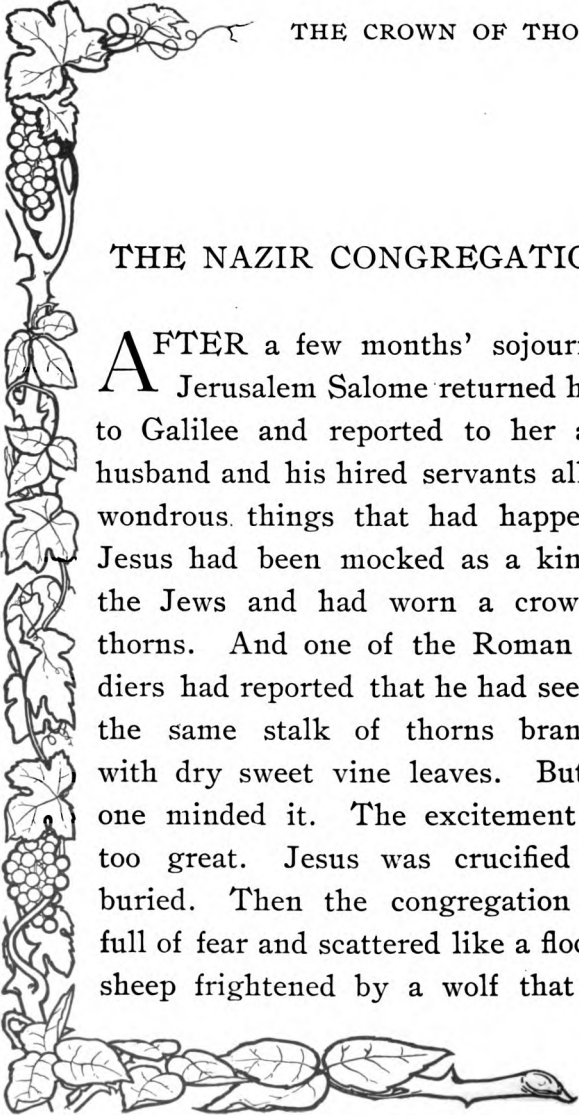
Longinus, who was the responsible officer in charge of the guards at the place of execution, was deeply impressed by the grand display of lightning in the heavens and the majestic

THE CROWN OF THORNS.

peals of thunder. Seeing the calm resignation of the Nazir prophet, he thought of Baldur, the meek god of his northern home, whose innocent death was bewailed by the whole creation, even by things inanimate, and feeling compassion for the sad lot of the crucified Messiah, the centurion exclaimed: "Truly, this man was the son of God!"



THE NAZIR CONGREGATION.

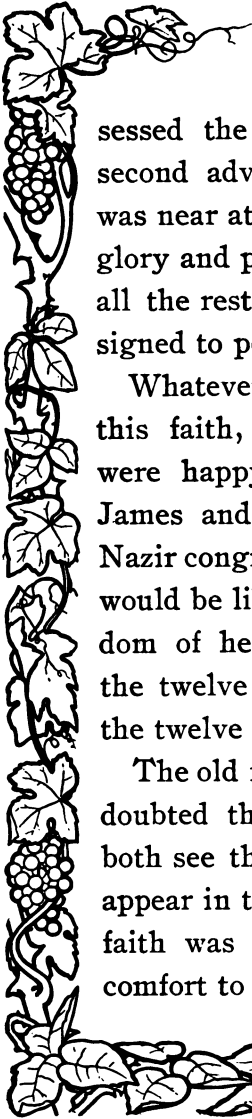


AFTER a few months' sojourn at Jerusalem Salome returned home to Galilee and reported to her aged husband and his hired servants all the wondrous things that had happened. Jesus had been mocked as a king of the Jews and had worn a crown of thorns. And one of the Roman soldiers had reported that he had seen on the same stalk of thorns branches with dry sweet vine leaves. But no one minded it. The excitement was too great. Jesus was crucified and buried. Then the congregation was full of fear and scattered like a flock of sheep frightened by a wolf that had

broken into the fold. But they returned to the city and found the tomb empty. Now the disciples became more and more convinced that their beloved master had risen from the dead. It was Jesus who gave them strength to bear the tribulations of the world. Jesus appeared to the women as a gardener. Jesus joined the wanderers on the road under the guise of a stranger, being recognised only afterwards by his way of breaking bread and giving thanks; and the dying martyr saw the glorified Jesus in the clouds seated at the right hand of God.

The spirit of God had come over the congregation, filling the brethren with zeal and faith, and all this served to make the sect increase in numbers. Though they were more and more impoverished, they felt that they pos-





sessed the grace of God and at the second advent of the messiah, which was near at hand, they would share the glory and power of his kingdom, while all the rest of mankind would be consigned to perdition.

Whatever may have been wrong in this faith, old Zebedee and Salome were happy in it. Their two sons James and John were pillars of the Nazir congregation at Jerusalem. They would be like unto princes in the kingdom of heaven, for they belonged to the twelve apostles that should judge the twelve tribes of Israel.

The old fisherman and his wife never doubted that they themselves should both see the day when the Lord would appear in the clouds of heaven. Their faith was an inexhaustible source of comfort to them until one evening they

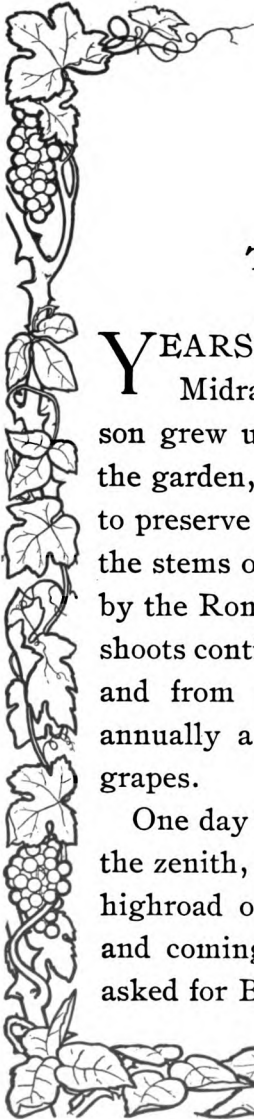
THE CROWN OF THORNS.

laid themselves to rest and never awoke from their slumber. They were found dead in the morning with a smile of transcendent glory on their faces.

James and John being far from home, the servants of Zebedee buried the old couple with pious reverence, praying at the grave for the resurrection of the deceased on the great day of the Lord.



THE VISITOR.



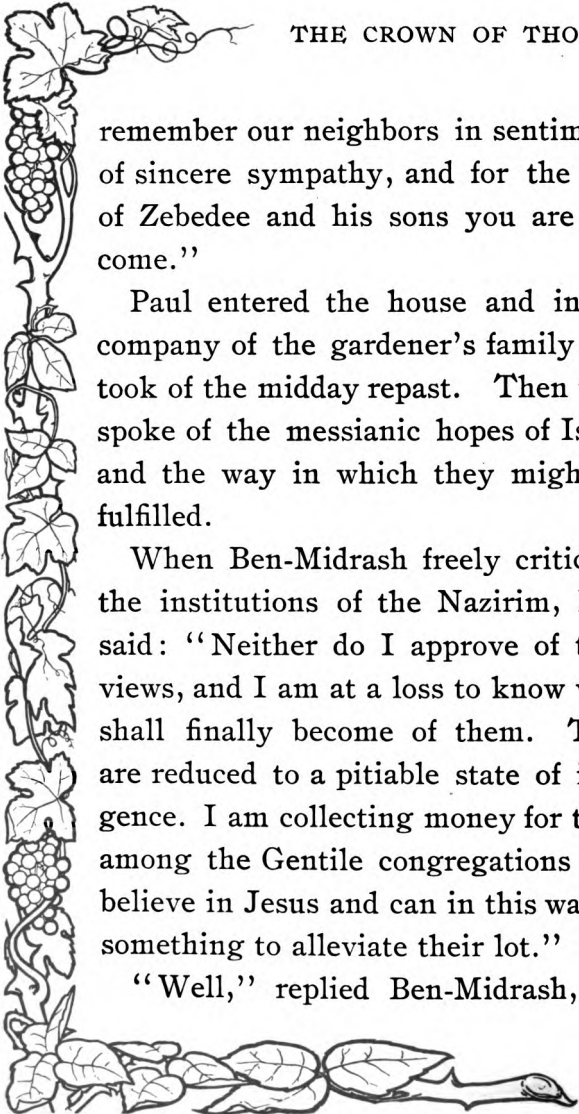
YEARS passed, and the hair of Ben-Midrash whitened with age. His son grew up and helped his father in the garden, and they took special care to preserve the hedge. Though one of the stems of the thorn had been cut off by the Roman centurion, several other shoots continued to blossom every year, and from them Ben-Midrash reaped annually a fair harvest of the best of grapes.

One day when the sun was almost in the zenith, a man with the dust of the highroad on his feet opened the gate, and coming straight up to the house, asked for Ben-Midrash. The gardener

replied: "I am Ben-Midrash! What is your desire?"

The stranger looked searchingly with his restless but radiant eyes into the face of the expectant Ben-Midrash and said: "I bring you greetings from James and John, the sons of Zebedee, your neighbor, and I am Saul of Tarsus, the same whom the Gentiles name Paul. I am an apostle of Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified and has risen from the dead, having become the saviour through whom mankind will be redeemed from the bondage of death."

Ben-Midrash said: "Though I know you not, I salute you as a compatriot and a friend of my friends. I am not a Nazir, but I love Jesus of Nazareth. I do not share the belief of Zebedee nor would I commend the institutions of the Nazir congregation; but we still



remember our neighbors in sentiments of sincere sympathy, and for the sake of Zebedee and his sons you are welcome."

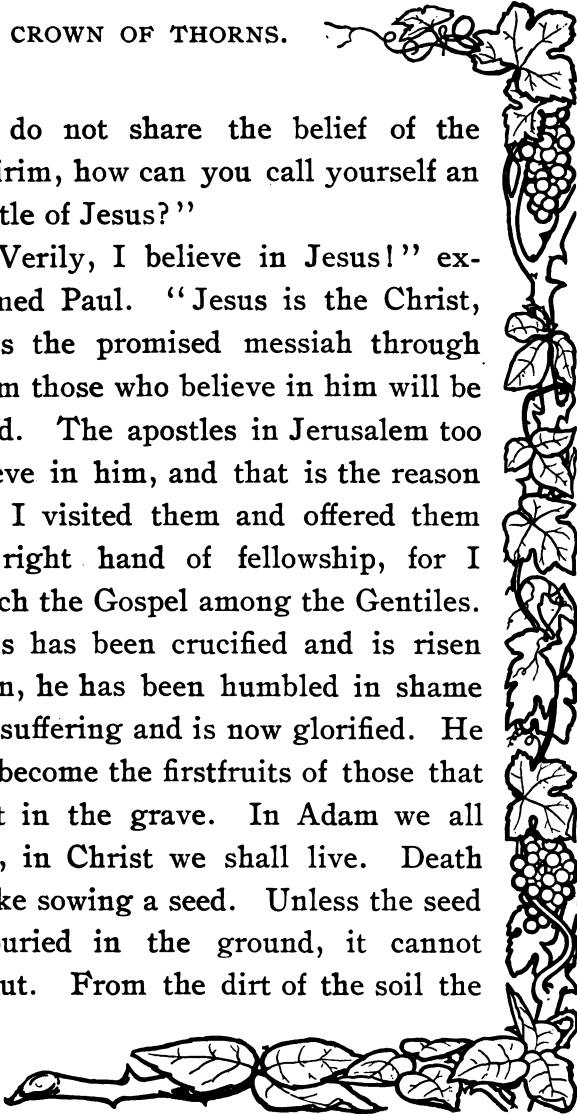
Paul entered the house and in the company of the gardener's family partook of the midday repast. Then they spoke of the messianic hopes of Israel and the way in which they might be fulfilled.

When Ben-Midrash freely criticised the institutions of the Nazirim, Paul said: "Neither do I approve of their views, and I am at a loss to know what shall finally become of them. They are reduced to a pitiable state of indigence. I am collecting money for them among the Gentile congregations that believe in Jesus and can in this way do something to alleviate their lot."

"Well," replied Ben-Midrash, "if

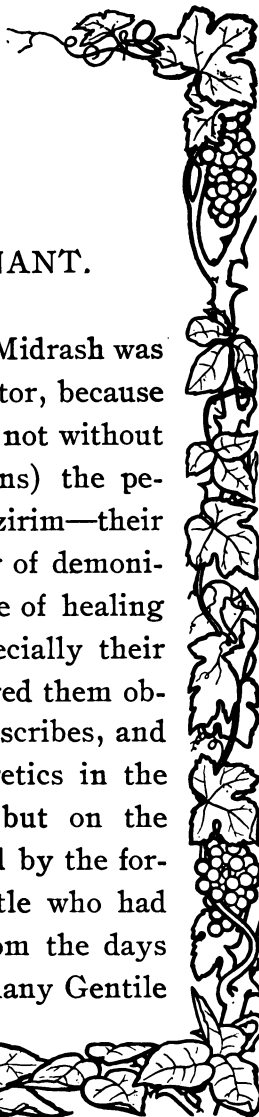
you do not share the belief of the Nazirims, how can you call yourself an apostle of Jesus?"

"Verily, I believe in Jesus!" exclaimed Paul. "Jesus is the Christ, he is the promised messiah through whom those who believe in him will be saved. The apostles in Jerusalem too believe in him, and that is the reason why I visited them and offered them the right hand of fellowship, for I preach the Gospel among the Gentiles. Jesus has been crucified and is risen again, he has been humbled in shame and suffering and is now glorified. He has become the firstfruits of those that slept in the grave. In Adam we all died, in Christ we shall live. Death is like sowing a seed. Unless the seed is buried in the ground, it cannot sprout. From the dirt of the soil the



beauty of a new life grows. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body. And so it is written, 'The first man Adam was made a living soul; the last Adam a quickening spirit,' and the last Adam was Jesus of Nazareth.'





THE NEW COVENANT.

ON the one hand, Ben-Midrash was pleased with his visitor, because he did not share (at least not without restrictions and reservations) the peculiar notions of the Nazirim—their belief in poverty, their fear of demoniacal possession, their mode of healing diseases by faith, and especially their communism—which rendered them obnoxious to the priests and scribes, and made them appear as heretics in the eyes of orthodox Jews; but on the other hand, he felt offended by the foreign manners of the apostle who had unconsciously, perhaps from the days of his childhood, adopted many Gentile

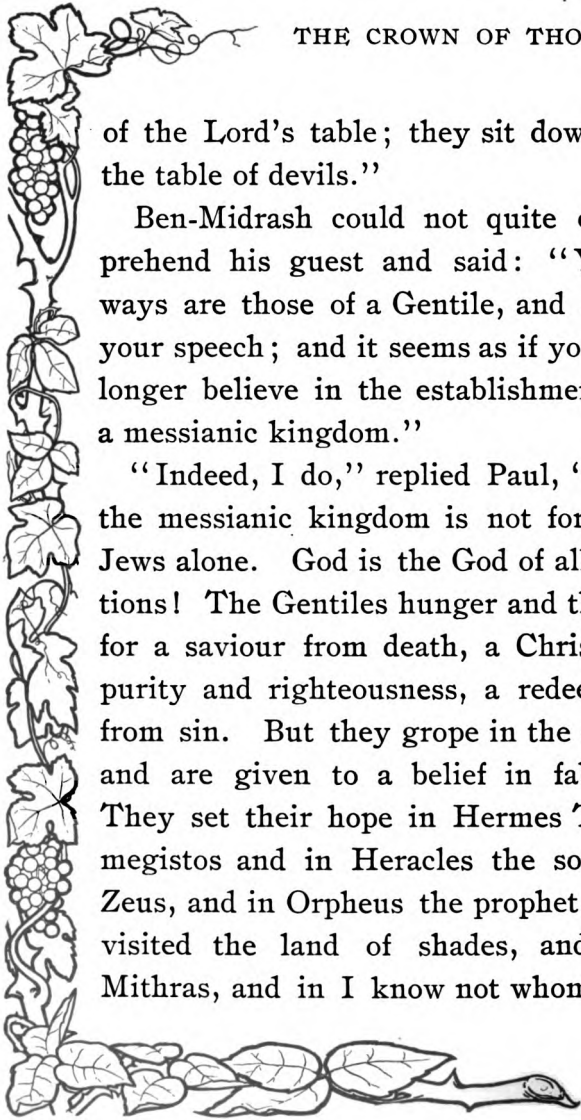
habits and whose speech was not free from Græcisms.

Paul said: "Jesus, though the son of well-to-do parents, joined the Nazirite sect and became poor for our sake. He humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God has highly exalted him and given him a name above every name. Every tongue must confess that Jesus Christ is the Lord."

Ben-Midrash after a pause asked his guest: "You are a Jew, but you converse with Gentiles and you extend to them the grace of God?"

"Truly I do," replied Paul. "I am sent to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles. Before God there is no difference between Gentile and Jew. The Jew has the law of Moses, but the law of Moses is an educator only for Christ.

It is no finality; and the Nazirim take many things that are unessential for essentials. To give up all one's possessions is good religious discipline, but it is not an indispensable condition for entering the kingdom. The essential thing is charity and brotherly love. If you knew the Gentile world as I do, you would comprehend that the prejudices of the Jews are not just. The Gentiles are as pious as are our own people; but they lack the proper spirit and the right interpretation. They have religious institutions the same as we. They have altars and sacrifice, they baptise, they spread the table for a Eucharist, they pray. But Satan has power over them. Our communion is a communion with Jesus, the Messiah. We drink the cup of Christ, they the cup of pagan deities; we are partakers



of the Lord's table; they sit down at the table of devils."

Ben-Midrash could not quite comprehend his guest and said: "Your ways are those of a Gentile, and so is your speech; and it seems as if you no longer believe in the establishment of a messianic kingdom."

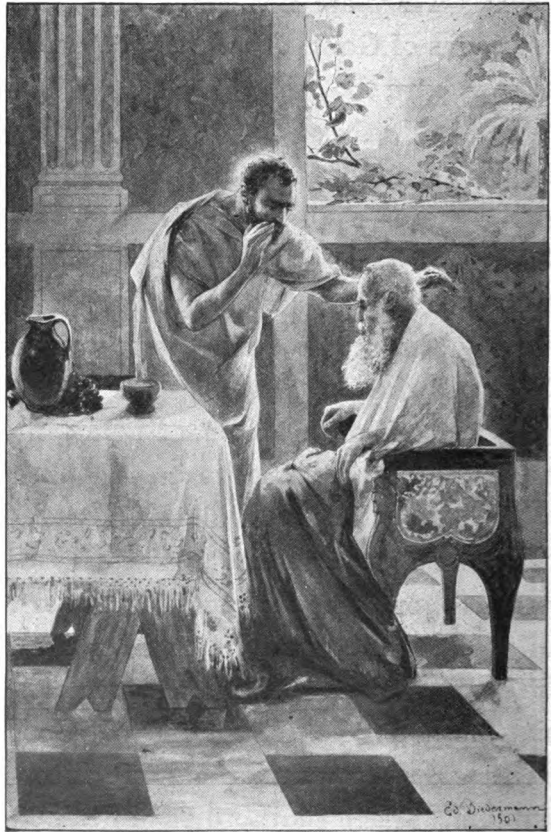
"Indeed, I do," replied Paul, "but the messianic kingdom is not for the Jews alone. God is the God of all nations! The Gentiles hunger and thirst for a saviour from death, a Christ of purity and righteousness, a redeemer from sin. But they grope in the dark and are given to a belief in fables. They set their hope in Hermes Trismegistos and in Heracles the son of Zeus, and in Orpheus the prophet who visited the land of shades, and in Mithras, and in I know not whom be-

sides. They are not conversant with the plans of God; they have no revelation as have the Jews.”

Ben-Midrash could not understand how a messiah could be expected by the Gentiles. So he asked Paul how he conceived of a kingdom of heaven that would be purely spiritual and should bring salvation at once to the Jews and the Gentiles.

Paul hesitated a moment before he answered and then spoke in a subdued voice as if he were divulging a secret of intense importance: “Let me reveal to you a mystery. We shall not all sleep in the grave, but we shall all be transfigured. Flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God, neither does corruption inherit incorruption. When the Lord shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the

THE CROWN OF THORNS.



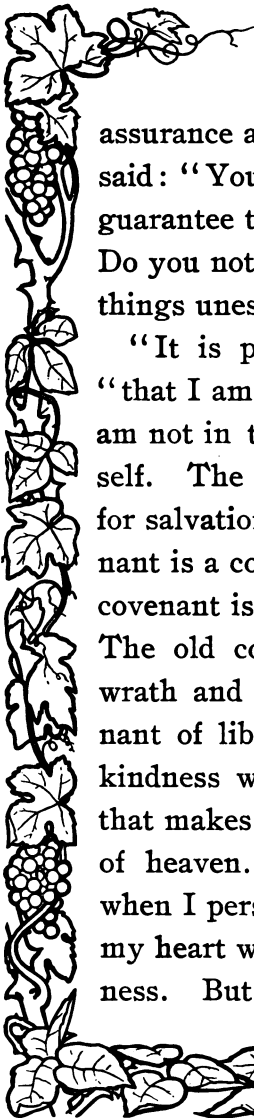
"Let me reveal to you a mystery."

voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God, the dead in Christ shall rise, but we that survive and remain until the end shall all be changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye. Then the corruptible will put on incorruption and the mortal immortality. And we shall be caught up together with the risen dead in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so shall we ever be with the Lord."

Ben-Midrash interrupted: "And when shall that day come?"

Paul answered: "Whether you will see the day of the Lord, I do not know; but I expect to see it, for it is near at hand."

Ben-Midrash shook his head. He was too realistic to accept unqualifiedly the speculations of his guest. Nevertheless, he was deeply affected by his



assurance and profound conviction and said: "You speak well, but where is the guarantee that your doctrines are true? Do you not, too, like the Nazirim, take things unessential for essentials?"

"It is possible," said the apostle, "that I am mistaken in details, but I am not in the main. Judge for yourself. The one thing that is essential for salvation is charity. The old covenant is a covenant of the law; the new covenant is a covenant of brotherhood. The old covenant is the covenant of wrath and of bondage; the new covenant of liberty and love. By loving-kindness we develop that spirituality that makes us fit to enter the kingdom of heaven. Now, there was a time when I persecuted the Nazirim. Then my heart was full of hatred and bitterness. But now I am filled with the

spirit of charity. My old self is crucified with Christ on the cross; it died. A new spirit has come over me, the spirit of Christ; and my soul has peace and is filled with bliss and heavenly joy. Consider then: If Christ liveth in me, he must have risen; and, judging from the Scriptures, he must have risen on the third day. If Christ is risen as the firstfruits of the dead, those who believe in him, too, will be raised. He must put all enemies under his foot, and the last enemy that shall be destroyed is death. Death being conquered, we shall rise with him and through him. Then we shall exclaim: 'O death, where is thy sting, O grave, where is thy victory?''

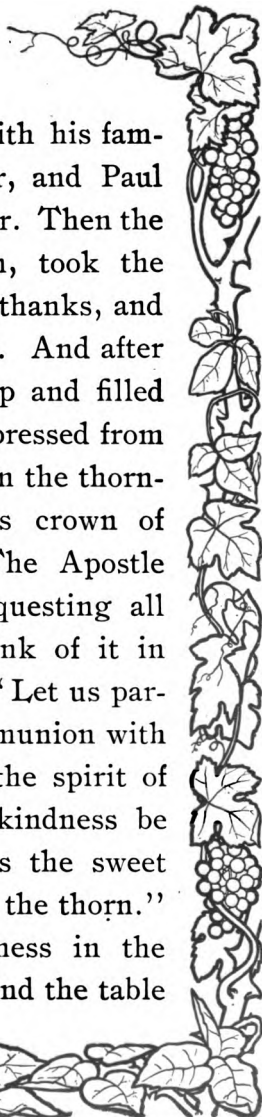
Paul's eyes were beaming and Ben-Midrash was taken captive by the zeal and winning personality of the apostle.



THE LORD'S SUPPER.

WHEN the day became cool, Ben-Midrash went out with his guest to the hedge and said: "Whatever may be true in your interpretation of the scriptures, I have had the same experience as you in my own soul. My heart was like this thorn, but I grafted on it the sweet vine of the spirit of Jesus, and my entire being was changed."

Having listened to the story of the gardener's thornbush, Paul said: "Truly, this transformation is wonderful, but it is not less wonderful than the transfiguration of our souls through Jesus."



Ben-Midrash sat down with his family and servants to supper, and Paul was given the place of honor. Then the guest, after Nazir fashion, took the bread, broke it, and gave thanks, and tendered it to the company. And after the supper, he took the cup and filled it with wine. It was wine pressed from the grape that had grown on the thorn-bush from which Christ's crown of thorns had been cut. The Apostle handed the cup round, requesting all seated at the table to drink of it in communion, and he said: "Let us partake of this cup for a communion with the risen Saviour. May the spirit of his good-will and loving-kindness be implanted in our souls as the sweet vine has been grafted upon the thorn."

There was a holy stillness in the room, and the company round the table

THE CROWN OF THORNS.

were filled with the spirit of him in whose remembrance they were assembled. Though Jesus of Nazareth had



They felt his presence in their hearts.

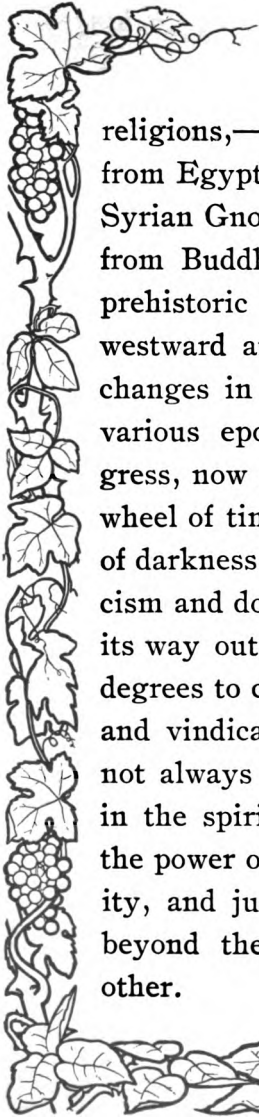
been crucified twenty years before, he was now there in the midst of them. As they conversed on such topics as

THE CROWN OF THORNS.

righteousness, and purity, and the resurrection, he shaped their thoughts and swayed their sentiments, and they felt his presence in their hearts.

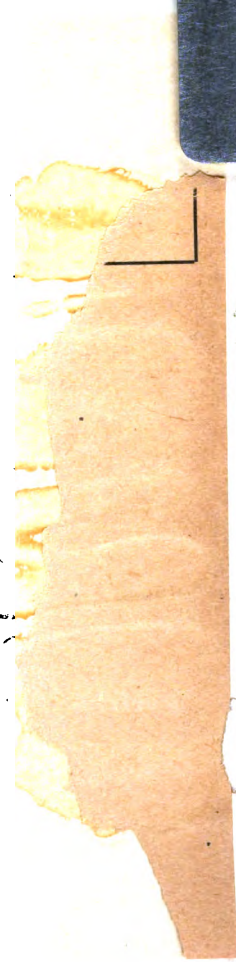


The events which form the background to the foregoing story have become most potent factors in history. The hope of St. Paul, that he should see the Lord come in the clouds of heaven, has not been fulfilled, and many doctrines which he deemed essential have since then been abandoned as unessential. But Christianity spread and took a firm hold on mankind. It became universal in its aspirations, incorporating at the same time thoughts, institutions, and festivals from other



religions,—from Greek philosophy, from Egyptian hermeneutics, from the Syrian Gnosis, from Mithras worship, from Buddhist ethics, and even from prehistoric traditions. In its spread westward and northward it underwent changes in different countries and at various epochs, now promoting progress, now serving as a brake on the wheel of time. It passed through ages of darkness and superstition, of fanaticism and dogmatic literalism, working its way out again sporadically and by degrees to clearness and moral purity, and vindicating its claim to truth, if not always in the letter yet certainly in the spirit, by proving to the world the power of loving-kindness and charity, and justifying the hope of a life beyond the grave in some form or other.

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